
Delphine Reguig-Naya combine ses connaissances théologiques et philosophiques avec une haute compétence en linguistique et un don admirable d’analyse littéraire. Elle va au centre des problématiques examinées et domine les riches matériaux à un tel point que le lecteur suit aisément ses analyses éclairantes.

Volker Kapp


Manning the Margins is a clever title for a very stimulating contribution both to the exploration of early-modern culture and to gender studies, supported by a vast knowledge of the scholarship in both domains: tackling the question of masculinity in early-modern France, Lewis Seifert fills a gap, since the issue has been slow in reaching French seventeenth-century studies (at least in France). In a kind of post-feminist stance, Seifert distances himself from the “conception of women and femininity as ‘marked’ categories as opposed to men and masculinity, the ‘unmarked’ universal” in order to “show that men can be and are ‘marked’” (17) – a
claim essential to the overall argument, though masculinity’s fallacious self-evidence has had long lasting consequences in Western culture.

The book presents a very clear, double faceted hypothesis: on the one hand, accepted models of masculinity are dialectically dependent on deviant, dissident, marginal ones, which they produce differentially at the same time as they are distinguished from them; on the other hand, those models that are embraced by the dominant circles are constantly and, as it were, constitutionally threatened by their counterparts, those viewed as negative. Hence the importance of the liminal dimension implied by the book’s title, and reflected in the overall structure (Part One: Civilizing the Margins: i. The Chevalier de Méré’s Quest for Honnête Masculinity; ii. Effeminacy and its Meanings from Court to Salon; iii. Vincent Voiture and the Perils of Galanterie; iv. Madeleine de Scudéry’s Tender Masculinity; Part Two: Sexuality and the Body at the Margins: v. Writing Sodomy: Satire, Secrets, and the ‘Self’; vi. Border Crossings: for a Transgendered Choisy), which addresses paradigms of masculinity and their ambiguities as well as individual figures who exemplify the complexities of the construction of gender identity. For, as has become common practice in gender-oriented studies, Seifert is interested in the “links between an author’s work and her or his biography,” though not in the *l’homme et l’œuvre* tradition (17), and he proposes to examine figures which, though marginal today, may have played an important role at the time (through their actual participation in the social circles where ideals and norms of masculinity were shaped and embodied, or because of their influence as writers or trendsetters), thus touching on questions of canonical recognition. Such characterizations as “transgendered” for the cross-dressing abbé de Choisy are thought-provoking, in their cross-temporality (a modern “tag” for an early-modern figure); a deeper exploration, however, of Choisy’s *male heterosexual* sexual practices would have been welcome to further illuminate this particular dissident figure (more individual than paradigmatic, it seems).

In tracing the genealogies of seventeenth-century masculinities while rejecting any strict adherence to chronology, and depending on an overarching concept of domination drawn from Bourdieu, Seifert first examines honnêteté and points to the gendered nature of the very notion. As an *art de plaire*, honnêteté is agonistic in nature. A perpetual quest and an elusive goal, for Méré at least, honnête masculinity is never autonomous nor is its dominance stable: it depends on its Others – the provincial man, the professional bourgeois, the overly ceremonious man, etc. (30 ff.). The risk is that, ultimately, it resemble them too much. And in this dynamic lies one of the main threads of the overall argument, effeminacy for instance being one of the major threats against (and sources of anxiety about) the then developing
models of masculinity. Bussy-Rabutin’s definition, given as a formulation typical of the shift away from birth and rank, as traditional signs of aristocratic prestige (“a refined man who knows [h]ow to live” 24-25) is central to the discussion: the transformation of the elite requires that new attitudes and behaviors be learned (hence the need for manuals like Faret’s *L’Honneste Homme*, mentioned by Seifert; it might have been useful to emphasize the full significance of the shift away from birth and rank in the overall argument). Since the author gives, at this juncture, a very good image of the end of the century, it might be relevant to mention the exchange between Bussy-Rabutin and his cousin, Sévigné, who, in 1677 observed that her cousin would have been in a better position to write the King’s history, as a member of the nobility, than two bourgeois who could not grasp the essence of the monarch’s and the monarchy’s history. The social dimension of gender construction might, as a whole, have been more fully explored. The two cousins seem to move away from Bussy’s nonclass-defined ideal as the bourgeois-friendly nature of Louis XIV’s regime became more and more apparent (a realization that one finds at its clearest in Saint-Simon’s *Memoirs*).

The most detailed part of Seifert’s argument concerns effeminacy as what lies at the core of men’s anxiety about the new ideal of *soft masculinity* (Seifert’s felicitous concept-phrase, which recurs in his analysis of tenderness in Scudéry’s world and works). Here, the reader finds the most sustained attempts at uncovering the ever-looming negative other in the process of redefining (taming) masculinity, reshaping it from open aggressiveness and violence in rivalry to self-control and, eventually, an ostensible relinquishing of power to women (in salon circles), something that will be explored more at length with the case of Virtue. One of the ubiquitous claims is that, by being defined by women, the new standards of masculinity are inseparable from the feminine, and as it were contaminated by it, and the more refined forms of masculinity imply qualities that are ‘naturally’ attributable to women. Though one may feel the risk of effeminization involved is overstated, Seifert offers a stimulating insight, in proposing that the process by which men acquire the signs of new, positively marked forms of masculinity allow them “to wrest the civilizing role from women” (60).

Here the parallel with assessments of women’s *natural* affinities with letter-writing and the gendered opposition of modes of letter-writing is striking (see the discussion of Voiture’s *galant* successes in ch. 3), in that the ostensible advantage on the side of women ends up being recast as lack, and re-credited, as it were, to men (cf. La Bruyère’s fragment 37 in “Des Ouvrages de l’Esprit”, quoted by Seifert, 115, and discussed below).
The case for the dangerous proximity of soft masculinity to effeminacy is convincing (though the end of the demonstration might have been concentrated), and it is supported by a purview of some of the signs that point to effeminacy—excess, softness, weakness, and passivity. But the examples brought to bear on the discussion are not always analyzed to their full potential. Indeed, Chrysale’s weakness (62) would have appeared as a disqualifying trait. But a very specific anxiety surfaces here that can be perceived as well in some of the reactions to Lafayette’s *The Princess of Clèves*, a novel that questions gender roles. The risk is not that men become too much like women; rather a reversal of gender roles may occur. In this respect the reliance on Frame’s translation for “laisser à sa femme un pouvoir absolu” (“to bow to his wife in word and deed”) is unfortunate, since the patriarchal order was reinforced (with new and/or revised laws) as Louis XIV’s absolutist monarchy progressed. It is significant that *Les Femmes savantes* was produced at the same time as Lafayette’s novel was written.

And this is connected to a major issue the book raises, its unproblematised and ever-shifting relationship to chronology. We are warned at the outset that the book was not following any chronological logic, yet such phrases as “Indicative of the evolving status of both the salon man and effeminacy” (which at the very end of the chapter on effeminacy, p. 96, serves to introduce a somewhat rapid overview of the petit-maître paradigm) testify to an awareness that paradigms (and perceptions) of masculinity are not fixed once and for all. However, after a mention of the drop in anxiety from the 16th to the 17th century, no systematic interest is attached to the diachronic evolution afterwards (see 84ff.)—despite the care with which the author circumscribes the milieus and works he analyzes (Scudéry’s salon for instance; Seifert even expounds on the specificity of individual salons, though he fails to factor in the social make-up—see 79). Bussy’s definition pointed to the problem. It is particularly evident in the chapter on Voiture and galanterie. For instance, a characterization of Voiture by Donneau de Visé is listed among reactions from “contemporaries” (99) and referenced as quoted by Magne in his study of Rambouillet’s salon with no other contextualization. But, if Chapelain also listed is Voiture’s contemporary, Donneau de Visé’s comment is retrospective. It may already be part of what Seifert later calls an ambiguous legacy. Bringing in Bouhours, who transcends in his gendered description of languages (112-123) rigid binaries by seeing in the French language a mix of “douceur” and “force” (not a clear argument, in fact, since the King being the exemplary French speaker, would certainly remove any threat of effeminacy, as it does in Bouhours who assigns effeminacy to Italian, and grandiloquence to Spanish), Seifert points to a shifting of taste vis-à-vis Voiture. When, however, he moves on to La Bruyère, and
eventually recognizes the latter’s efforts to relocate Voiture on the side of art as opposed to women, who are relegated to nature (115), he explains: “The risks of effeminacy that earlier generations perceived no longer exist, so it seems, because true galanterie is a thing of the past” and goes on to conclude: “From Pinchesne’s deliberate celebration for his uncle’s ties with women to La Bruyère’s attempt to break those ties, we have come full circle. But at issue throughout the century is the place of galant masculinity in relation to femininity. How should the galant homme ‘imitate’ women? And how should he do so in a way that paradoxically accentuates his difference and his distance from the other sex?” (115). But this conclusion fails to contextualize La Bruyère’s fragment (from 1689) as part of a larger move to reassert the masculine, patriarchal side of culture, a part of the political public sphere, where for instance the French Academy (of which Voiture not so coincidentally was a founding member) has a major role to play as against what has been characterized as a socio-cultural, apolitical, feminine public sphere. Incidentally, the discussion of Voiture’s posthumous fate is one of the places in the book where the author’s claim is occasionally not well supported. Using Pinchesne’s dedication to women: “Look on the works that came from his hands with as kind an eye as that with which he saw in you the most beautiful creation that came from the hands of nature” (102), Seifert states that Voiture’s works are equated with women, a claim his translation does not exactly bear out.

Translation is also an issue (as has already been seen above), both in the choices made and in the reliance on them for the demonstration. “Play[ing] the role of the enticing and handsome man” seems hardly apt to translate faire l’agréable et le beau (64). The distinction between love and friendship plays an important role in the rich and very useful discussion of tendresse and tender masculinity (with the connection between tenderness and power relations between men and women implied) in Scudéry’s samedis as well as in her novels. However, as per an editorial decision, texts are only quoted in English, with the exception of phrases such as “violente amitié” and “violente amour” (132). But in seventeenth-century French, “amitié” is used to cover some of the meanings of “amour” and it would be helpful to have the whole passages quoted and discussed in the original French version. And does “joke,” the recurring equivalent for “plaisanterie” (see “exquisite jokes”, 114), really convey the pleasantries of and witty conversation? A wrong translation can skew important discussions of gender (and) identity, as is the case in the discussion of satiric texts about Monsieur, Louis XIV’s brother, and sodomy. Increasingly, Seifert explains, sodomy and masculinity were defined in opposition (154-155). His conclusion (“By relegating sodomy to the subordinate position, satires attempt to counteract the
fluidity between hetero- and homoerotic desire.”) actually misses the full significance of the gesture, because of a mistranslation. “Car, s’il fut mort comme il avoit vescu,/ Il seroit mort le v[it] au cul” is rendered by: “For, if he’d died as he had lived,/ He would have died with his cock up an ass” (153), whereas the phrase can only mean “with a cock up his ass,’ a meaning confirmed by the context. Not only does the song assign to Monsieur a fixed sexual identity (a potential argument against the post-Foucauldian doxa), it also stigmatizes him for his (fixed) sexual role as the passive partner, a troubling departure from the expected dominance his social status would otherwise imply. Thus, Monsieur is implicated in a reversal of the ‘normal’ social hierarchy, a reversal all the more significant that Monsieur is also credited with great military prowess and valor that contrast with his mollesse and passivity, two of the signs of effeminacy studied in the book.

It will be clear, then, that Manning the Margins is an important book on an very significant and until now understudied aspect of the culture of early modern France, and the “afterimage,” a reading of a 1620 male figure by Bosse also confirms that it will also contribute to a historicizing of masculinity and gender studies in general.

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